

## BLOOD ON THE LETTUCE

by Henry Anderson,

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Pacifica Foundation, Berkeley, Calif.)

When a Buddhist monk immolates himself in protest over social injustice, it weighs heavily upon our hearts. But, at least, he had some volition in the matter. It is not as though he were altogether unconsulted. In this respect, the slaughter of the innocents weighs even more heavily upon the heart. On September 15, six children were killed in Birmingham, through no fault of theirs. On September 17, thirty-one farm workers were killed in the Salinas Valley, through no fault of theirs. The innocent children, and the innocent braceros, were human sacrifices. And as long as we continue to practice human sacrifice, we have absolutely no right to feel we have a civilized, enlightened, developed, ethical, or humane society, worthy of respect or emulation from anyone.

Many others have talked of the killing of the Birmingham children. I am going to talk about the sacrifice of the thirty-one braceros, because it is particularly our responsibility here in California, and because its significance has been lost on all our moulders of a nightier public opinion.

Bracero deaths and dismemberment on the highways have been one of the characteristics of the bracero system ever since it was instituted. To mention just a few cases from recent years:

In 1956, seven braceros were killed near Salinas in a collision between a railroad train and the panel truck in which they were being hauled.

In May, 1957, a gang of 48 braceros was perched on a flat bed truck going around a curve at 40 miles an hour. Two fell off; one was seriously injured, the other was killed.

In September, 1957, a flat bed truck with 41 braceros overturned in a San Joaquin County slough, critically injuring 13 of the men.

In November, 1957, another open truck loaded with braceros turned over. Ten were injured.

On June 17, 1958, twelve braceros burned to death in a farm labor bus accident in the Salinas Valley -- a record up to that time.

On June 8, 1959, sixteen braceros were "cremated" when their "crudely fashioned bus" (the words are those of the Associated Press) crashed into a tree and exploded near Phoenix.

Just last month, three braceros were killed in a farm labor bus accident in Tulare County.

And now the Salinas Valley has broken its own previous record when 31 braceros were killed while being hauled back to camp from the celery and lettuce fields.

There will be the usual flurry of pious pronouncements and investigations by the U.S. Department of Labor and the other government agencies supposedly concerned. But I suspect the gestures will be even more perfunctory than usual. It is widely assumed that the bracero program will terminate at the end of this year, and in these last few months -- why get too excited? By the time these remarks are broadcast, we will know whether the last desperate effort of bracero-users to get their system extended has succeeded or failed. The death of the thirty-one martyrs of the Salinas Valley may also prove to have been the death of the bracero system. If bracero-users had <sup>been</sup> well advised by their public relation flacks, they would have spent a little less time lobbying in Washington and a little more time back here in California, making sure there were no major scandals in their program while the Congressional vote was pending.

But in my judgment, it does not make a crucial amount of difference whether the bracero law is extended or not. The growers and contractors, who have used this type of labor for many years, now have a large investment in trucks and buses, housing and feeding facilities, suitable only for the use of all-male gangs. I do not believe they are going to write off these investments. I do not believe they are ever going to begin thinking in terms of a normal, American style of labor force until they have to. And they aren't going to have to so long as organized labor, government bodies, and the general public are as indifferent as they are now. Given this indifference, there will be just about as many single males in California agriculture next year as this. They will be housed in the same old camps and transported in the same old vehicles. Under these circumstances, it is just a matter of time before another ten, or twenty, or thirty men are slaughtered on the highway. Whether these men are braceros, or "green-carders", or Japanese, or domestics, is altogether beside the point.



"Accidents will happen," some may say -- those who are lazy, ignorant, cowardly, or callous. But accidents don't just happen. They are caused, like every other event in the natural universe. They are the end product of a number of contributing factors. And when they recur, as they do, they become subject to the same sort of analysis and prediction and control as any other problem of human well-being. The field of public health has a word for this sort of analysis: epidemiology. It is a method which could be just as useful in tracing the origins of bracero catastrophes as it has proved in tracing the cause of lung cancer.

To the extent there has been any concern at all with bracero deaths to date, it has been hopelessly simple-minded. If there is a disaster involving gasoline containers, as there was in 1958, you pass a law about gasoline containers, as the California legislature did in 1959. If there is a disaster involving brake failure, you put more emphasis on inspecting brakes. If there is a disaster involving driver error, you put less emphasis on inspecting brakes and more on screening drivers. But this ad hoc approach can go on forever, with only slight effect on the recurrence of disasters, since there are a great many kinds of mechanical failure, add a great many kinds of human failure, and their combinations and permutations are almost infinite. There are plenty of regulations on the books already. It almost seems that as they multiply, so do bracero deaths.

I suggest that what is required is an entirely different kind of epidemiology. It might be called social, or political, or economic epidemiology. I suggest that the real question is not, "Why did that particular driver pull in front of that particular freight train?", but, "What were those 60 men doing in that bus in the first place?" Or, if you prefer a more "objective" question, "Why is the accident rate so much higher for bracero buses than for other types of buses?" I wouldn't be surprised if the death rate per passenger-mile is a hundred times that of other carriers. If you live in Berkeley, you have undoubtedly seen employees of the Radiation Laboratory travelling around in yellow AEC buses. None of them have been immolated. What makes the difference?

I say that we are going to continue having recurrent farm labor disasters just as long as farm laborers are herded around in gangs, fed in gangs, housed in gangs, transported in gangs, like dumb animals rather than sentient human beings. It is not just a matter of the sheer numbers involved. It is more a matter of concern for the importance of that number -- or any number -- of human beings.

When the driver of a Greyhound Bus comes to a railroad crossing, even one which has carried no trains for years, he stops and looks both ways. Regulations, of course, say that he must do this. But there is more to it than that. At some level of his subconscious, I think, he has some inkling of his enormous responsibility. He is carrying the most precious cargo in the world: people.

Handlers of farm laborers have no such inkling. Maybe they once had, but it cannot survive the system for long. Every phase of agricultural employment is marked by contempt for workers. They are recruited in brutish shape-ups. They are given no place to urinate or defecate on the job, so they have to relieve themselves in public. They are relegated to third-class citizenship by a long series of discriminatory and probably unconstitutional exclusions from social, economic, and civil rights laws. They are pushed and shoved and hauled hither and yon, always at the pleasure of somebody else. They are viewed as commodities, as objects, as chattels.

I say in all seriousness that the average bracero-holder probably has less respect for his chattels than the average slave-holder had for his a hundred years ago. A slave represented an investment of what would today be several thousand dollars. You can get a bracero from the Department of Labor for \$15. And you can get a "green carder" from the Immigration Service for nothing. With a slave of the old style, you usually showed some responsibility, because he was going to be with you, in season and during the off-season, year in and year out. You rent a bracero for six weeks or six months, and if he gets damaged, you don't care. You'll never see him again. You get next year's model -- a newer, younger, healthier one.

In my considered opinion, this is the only meaningful epidemiology of bracero catastrophes: contempt for human beings. And if braceros are replaced by "green carders" or Jamaicans or Japanese or somebody else next year, the catastrophes will continue, because these new workers will be held in contempt, too.



The basic, constant sickness underlying the occasional catastrophes which make the headlines, is lack of respect for farm laborers and farm labor as such. This sickness is not confined to the foremen, camp operators, drivers, and others who push farm workers around directly. We are all infected. It would be difficult to say whether we caught our sick attitude from them or they from us. When you and I, through our elected representatives, write agricultural exclusions into our Fair Employment Practices Act and all the other laws which confer a shred of dignity upon workers, we are wantonly spreading the sickness of contempt for farm labor.

What is to be done? Basically, start having some respect for the human beings who made it possible for you to have that green salad last night, those sliced peaches this morning -- the baked potato, onion rings, strawberries, orange juice -- all those good things to eat -- and don't forget the cotton in the things you wear, and dry yourself on, and sleep under -- and there is even the olive in your martini, and the pimento in the middle of the olive. The most useful thing we can do to stop the cremation of live farm workers is for us to recover from the sickness of our contempt for the very people whose labor we should honor more than any other. When we do this, our lengthened shadows in the legislatures will throw off their similar sickness, labor unions will throw off theirs, and the walls of third class citizenship will come tumbling down.

When they are receiving the \$3 or \$4 an hour, and fringe benefits, which are due any skilled workmen in our level of economy, agricultural workers will get to their jobs the way workers do in other industries. No one would think of cramming 60 construction workers into a converted truck to haul them to a job site. They drive their own cars. True, some non-agricultural employees are carried in company transportation. Railroad maintenance-of-way workers, for example. You have probably seen the Southern Pacific's panel trucks on the highways. But they are comfortable, as these things go; they are well maintained; and the workers are transported in small groups rather than large gangs. And the drivers care about what they are doing. I have never heard of a highway disaster involving maintenance-of-way workers.

In justice, I think we should have even more respect for the workers who produce our food and clothing than workers who produce other commodities -- say, Atlas missiles or Polaris submarines. But I'm not asking for that. I'm just asking for equal respect. Until we have reached that state in our social epidemiology, there will continue to be blood on our lettuce.

Until we recover from our contempt, farm labor "accidents", so called, will continue to be human sacrifices to a sickness of our society, as racial killings are human sacrifices to another, related sickness.

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